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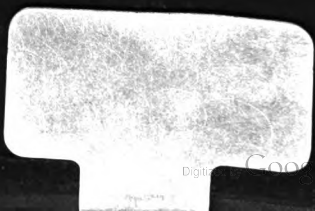
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A saint in Algeria [a life of A. Berger, based on articles ...



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A SAINT IN ALGERIA.

BY
LADY HERBERT.



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A SAINT IN ALGERIA.*

PART THE FIRST.

 HERE are few visitors to Algeria who do not make a pilgrimage to the beautiful basilica of "Notre Dame d'Afrique," either for purposes of piety or to see the glorious views from the mountain on which it is placed.

Probably few of the former leave the place without stopping for a few moments at the little shop or stall which abuts on St. Joseph's Chapel, and where, accord-

* To conform to the laws of the Church, the writer declares that, in this biographical notice, she only uses the name of "Saint," or speaks of revelations and miracles, in the sense in which it is permitted to do so, while humbly submitting all judgment on such matters to the Holy See.

ing to French custom, a multitude of pictures, medals, crosses, and photographs of "Notre Dame d'Afrique" are to be sold. But to those who frequented this stall in past years, one of its great attractions was the sweet face and winning manner of the lady who sold those little objects of devotion.

Now that the grave has closed over the earthly remains of this humble but saintly woman, we venture to give our readers a short account of her life, drawn from authentic sources, to which, through the kindness of the Father Superior of Notre Dame d'Afrique, we have had access.*

Margaret Bergésio was born in Piedmont, at Conio, near Turin, in the year 1809, on the 8th of September, the feast of the Nativity of our Blessed Lady, that Mother whom she so devotedly loved,

* The greater portion of the facts in this biographical notice is taken from a series of articles in the African *Revue de St. Augustin et de St. Monique*, signed "L. J. Christus."

and to whose honour she was hereafter to contribute so much.

She was an only child, for her father died soon after her birth, and her mother having married again, the little Margaret was intrusted to the care of her grandparents, who were models of virtue and practical piety. They devoted themselves to training the heart and soul of this little child ; and the seeds of faith and holiness sown by them were to bear fruit hereafter a hundredfold. Yet they were only allowed this consolation a short time, for their grandchild was but eight years of age when her mother determined to leave her native country and settle in Lyons, on which occasion she insisted on taking her little girl with her, having no children by her second marriage. Bitterly as her grandfather felt this separation, he was happily unaware how terrible the change would be to poor little Margaret. There is in those quiet villages of Piedmont a manly earnest piety, an unquestioning faith, and a tender reverence for all holy

things, which stamp a peculiar character upon its inhabitants. It is the same atmosphere as is felt, even by Protestants, in the Tyrol. Our Lord and His Church form the main points, so to speak, in their daily lives. Every house, every field, is placed under holy protection, and to miss Mass on days of obligation or to neglect Easter duties would be an unheard-of sin, visited by the reprobation of the whole community.

In this sort of religious atmosphere had the little Margaret been trained, and we can therefore form some idea of the feelings with which she suddenly found herself transplanted into a big town, where every one was a stranger to her, where no one seemed to think of or care for our Divine Lord and His Mother, and where all the pious practices of her childhood were ridiculed and contemned. Her mother was her greatest trial. Utterly frivolous and worldly, and without any religious principles herself, she embittered every hour of her child's life, and all the more

as, with the strong feelings of filial reverence which had been implanted in her, Margaret did not dare remonstrate or argue with her mother, even on certain points in which she knew she was right. It was indeed a special grace which preserved the poor child's faith at so tender an age from the effects of her infidel surroundings. But it does not appear that our Lord ever allowed the smallest doubt to sully this pure and virginal soul. Thwarted in all the religious practices in which she most delighted, and exposed to the reproaches and ridicule both of her mother and stepfather for what they called her "prudish ways," Margaret only suffered in silence, and, whenever she could, escaped to her little room to cry and pray. Even her name was changed by her mother to please her new French friends, and the child was henceforth known only as Agarithé Berger. Then began her tender devotion to our Lady of Sorrows. She had a little picture of the Seven Dolours, which her grand-

father had given her, and, young as she was, she daily united her sorrows to those of Jesus and Mary, and endeavoured at their feet to gain strength and wisdom for her difficult path. No wonder then that, when she presented herself, by stealth, at St. Nizier, in Lyons, to be prepared for her First Communion, the holy priest to whom she came for instruction was amazed at the precocious intelligence and piety of the child, who answered all his questions with a degree of spiritual knowledge which edified as much as it surprised him. Agarithe was then eleven years old, and to the last hour of her life she would reckon among her most signal graces having at that time fallen into the hands of a director who so thoroughly understood the wants of her soul, and who could discover the precious treasure which it had pleased God to conceal there. He guided her through all those sad and difficult years (of which Agarithe never could bear to speak), when childhood is merging into girlhood and girlhood into

womanhood, with all its peculiar trials and temptations—increased, in her case, a thousandfold by her painful domestic circumstances. She was not quite twenty when (in 1829), disgusted with the world, of which she had long since found out the deceptions, she obtained leave from her mother (with great difficulty, as may be supposed) to enter the community of Nursing Sisters (*Sœurs Hospitalières*) in the Hôtel Dieu at Lyons. She was then in the full beauty of youth, with a gentle loving manner, and a peculiarly modest, sweet expression ; but over her face, from the very beginning of her childish sorrows, a look of resigned sadness had been cast, like one who is an alien from her real home, and that expression remained on her face till death.

Happy indeed were the days she now passed in the hospital. She seemed to have found her vocation in every sense of the word, not only from her love of solitude and recollection with God, but also because the rest of her time was spent

in tending the sick, the poor, and the miserable, towards whom her whole heart had always gone out in love and compassion, as for the suffering members of Christ's body.

Yet it did not please Him that she should be allowed to spend more than one short twelvemonth in this house. God had other designs in store for her. The revolution of 1830 brought a complete change in the administration of the hospital, and the open hostility and ill-will of the new managers of the institution compelled the chaplain to resign. He was also the director of the Sisters, who felt that it was impossible to remain in an establishment where they could no longer observe the rules of their order. The community was therefore broken up and the Sisters dispersed. But Agarithe always gratefully expressed her sense of the obligation she was under to those religious for the training in poverty and holy obedience she had there received.

An event happened about this time

which had a great bearing on her future life. This was the appointment of M. Pavy, then quite a young priest, to be the vicar of the church and parish of St. Bonaventura at Lyons. It was while seeking out the lost sheep among his numerous flock that this holy pastor first discovered Agarithe's mother; and thus he became acquainted with her holy and devoted daughter, who henceforth chose him as her director and guide. Finding her most anxious to undertake some work for God, he placed her first in a kind of work-room, where he had gathered together some fifteen or twenty young needlewomen, under the superintendence of a very holy woman named Mdme. Aulinet, who had the reputation of directing her little household like an austere religious community. All pious exercises were here performed at stated hours, and the employments of each day were so marked out that, between and after the hours of work, the members undertook to go by turns and carry food or clothing to the poor, to visit the sick, to serve the

bedridden or blind, and to pray in the name of the rest before the Blessed Sacrament or at the feet of Notre Dame de Fourvières on the hill above the town of Lyons.

Two years of Agarithe's life were spent in this holy home, of which she ever retained the most affectionate remembrance. She used often to recall those days, and laugh over her nights, which were spent in a long drawer by way of a bed, placed on some planks in a raised corner of their common sitting-room ; so anxious was she to preserve her vow of poverty, and not to take anything from the feeble resources at the disposal of the house, which were mainly devoted to the relief of the suffering poor around them.

She only left this place in obedience to her confessor, who wished her, with another companion, to undertake a fresh work, and that was a home for young workwomen and apprentices without parents or proper supervision, who were to come back to her for their meals

and for the night, and whom she was to look after and encourage in every possible way to persevere in the right road. The number of souls thus saved by her winning ways and gentle influence is known only to God.

But our Lord was not content with thus employing her in His service. Perhaps to one of her active zeal and fervent temperament such work was only too attractive and too happy in its visible good results. He Who destined her to reach the higher paths of perfection, led her by a hidden way of suffering, for which she was totally unprepared. He sent her a long and dangerous illness, and the trial was heightened by the unkindness of her relatives and by the utter destitution to which she was reduced. The Home had to be given up, and she and her faithful friend, who never left her (Mdme. Anna Siquin), removed to a little room in a poor house near the church. Here for fifteen years she lived in a condition which outwardly had nothing re-

markable about it ; but which in reality became a source of inexhaustible merit to her, from the terrible and varied sufferings she there endured and the perfect union of her will to the will of God. Being entirely incapacitated from labour of any sort and quite confined to her bed, Anna went out to work to earn the food of both ; while Agarithé was left the whole day long entirely alone, without any of the alleviations her suffering state required, and exposed to every kind of privation. She had the grief, likewise, of seeing her charitable efforts to save the souls of those young girls brought to a close, and the Home, from which she had hoped so much, shut up and abandoned. Yet her faith and love never failed. "To suffer, therefore, is what awaits thee, if thou art resolved to love Jesus and constantly to follow Him." These words of the *Imitation* were ever present to her mind ; and, as Fénelon justly says, that "where there is no resistance of the will there is no suffering," so her simple acceptance of

what to others appeared so insupportable a cross, brought with it not only resignation but cheerfulness and even joy. She resolved to offer up a portion of her sufferings for the conversion of her mother, who was getting old and infirm, yet as far as ever from God. And this offering was accepted; so that Agarithe had the inexpressible consolation of seeing her mother return to her childhood's faith and die in 1840, fortified by all the rites of the Church. Soon after this happy event, Agarithe's health began slightly to improve, which enabled her once more to have the joy of hearing Mass and even to visit Notre Dame de Fourvières, the sanctuary for which she had such special devotion. Her love of solitude, her union with God in the Blessed Sacrament, her devotion to Mary, and her willingness to suffer as long as it was the will of God, continued to increase. At last, satisfied with her acceptance of this heavy trial, our Lord removed it as suddenly as it had been sent, and Agarithe recovered both

health and strength. This was the moment chosen by God for the commencement of the work to which He had appointed her, and for which her previous life and sufferings had been the preparation.

It was in 1846 that M. Pavy was appointed to the episcopal see of Algiers. At the first news of his promotion, Agarithe's heart sank within her; for he had been her director, guide, and faithful friend for seventeen years, nor did she then see the smallest prospect of meeting him again on this side of the grave.

One of Mgr. Pavy's first cares on arriving at Algiers was the establishment of a Seminary, wherein he might train priests for his enormous diocese, as well as native missionaries for the evangelizing of the Arab tribes. But no sooner had he obtained a house for this purpose, than he found that everything was needed for the fitting up of the establishment; and that, what was more important than all the rest, was to find some conscientious person to take charge of the linen of the house and

to have the care of the infirmary and the sick students.

His first thoughts naturally turned to Agarithé and her companion, and he wrote at once to implore them to join him in Africa. Agarithé regarded this request of her spiritual father as an answer to her prayers and a direct order from above. She and her friend at once made the necessary preparations for leaving Lyons ; and braving the dangers of the sea and expatriation, which to French people is more terrible than to any other nation, they arrived in Algiers less than three months after their beloved Bishop and guide.

He at once put Anna in charge of the house ; and to Agarithé, who had served her noviceship at the Hôtel Dieu as Hospital Sister, he confided the care of the infirmary. Few of the Algerian priests who were trained in the Seminary of St. Eugène during that time have forgotten the motherly and tender care of their Infirmary when laid low by the fever and

other diseases, which seem inseparable in a hot climate to the fresh comers from a more northern land. But all made one remark : and that was, that during the eight years Agarithe held this office, not only did her devotedness never fail, but that extraordinary cures were effected when the doctors had given up all hope. Not one death took place at St. Eugène during her residence there ; and the students ascribed this fact less to her remedies and good nursing than to the efficacy of her prayers.

Agarithe herself soon began to look upon Africa as her adopted country. But one thing alone grieved her in leaving Lyons, and that was, no longer to be able to climb the steep hill which led to Notre Dame de Fourvières ; that holy sanctuary where every Saturday of her life at four o'clock in the morning (when not incapacitated by illness) she had offered up the prayers, the praises, the sufferings, and the good works of the whole week to the Mother of Consolation. Nothing in

Algiers replaced this privation, and the longing for it only increased as years rolled by.

It was full of these thoughts that Agarithé, during her few moments of leisure, used to wander in a little valley near the Seminary, called "The Ravine."

It is a narrow valley completely hemmed in by rocks, through the centre of which a rapid river flows over moss and stones, here and there falling in little cascades and running eventually down to the sea. By the side of the river and following its windings, runs a little path shaded by fine old olive-trees. The banks on both sides are carpeted with flowers and evergreen shrubs, interlaced with honeysuckle, clematis, and other creepers, forming a delightful shade, even on the hottest day. The whole place speaks of peace, recollection, and calm.

This ravine was one of Agarithé's favourite haunts. Unhappily it became also a hiding-place for vagabonds of all sorts; so that Agarithé soon found it im-

possible to find there the much-loved solitude she sought for.

She was pondering over this one day, when she received the sudden inspiration to place a little statue of our Lady in one of the forked branches of one of the old olive-trees which shaded the path, and to establish her there as Mistress of the Ravine. She felt as if she had received a direct order from Mary to cause her name to be honoured in this mountain, which had been formerly watered by the blood of martyrs. Agarithé communicated this idea to the Bishop of Algiers, who warmly approved of it; and that very day the inspiration was carried out, and a little white statue of Mary came to take possession of a mossy throne which had been prepared for her close to the path, in a spot where the vegetation was the most luxuriant and the flowers the brightest. Agarithé arranged it all and then went home joyfully, persuaded that our Lady would henceforth preserve this spot from all evil.

Her confidence was not misplaced : from that day forth the ravine was no longer the rendezvous of rogues, but became the scene of constant prayer. Some sailors' wives had remarked Agarithe, when going along the path, devoutly kneeling at the foot of the little statue and praying with a wonderful expression of love and fervour. This unexpected sight impressed them all the more when anxious themselves for the safety of those they held most dear. On stormy days, or when a severe gale had passed, they took the habit of coming up to the ravine, either to invoke our Lady's protection or to return thanks ; and some would bring flowers, others candles, and burn them at her feet.

Agarithe's heart overflowed with joy at these manifestations of piety and love. She foresaw that this mountain would become a place of pilgrimage like that in her beloved Lyons, and Mgr. de Pavy, who shared in her regrets for Fourvières, saw in this humble beginning an indication of what the future would bring forth, and

determined to make the Blessed Virgin the patron of his immense diocese.

Very soon, the number of pilgrims and the graces obtained by them increased so much that Agarithe once more had recourse to the Bishop; and with his assistance a grotto was built of rocks and shells, and a more suitable image of our Lady was brought there by the Bishop himself (accompanied by all his clergy and students), who solemnly blessed the statue and took possession of the spot, while hymns in our Lady's honour and verses composed for the occasion were sung by the whole company.

Yet even in the midst of her joy, Agarithe was not satisfied. She wanted to build a larger and more permanent temple on that mountain, which should be, as she called it, the "Lighthouse of Africa"; but resources of all kinds were wanting.

At last, Mgr. Pavy determined to build a provisional chapel, trusting that his successors would be enabled to complete what

he had begun ; and on the 2nd of July, 1854, the first stone was laid of the new building.

It was then arranged that Agarithe should leave the Seminary and take up her abode in a little house adjoining the chapel, both to promote the devotion to our Lady and to sell tapers and other pious objects, the profits of which were to go towards the expenses of the building. From that day until the close of her life she never left this poor cabin or the work which the Bishop had assigned to her.*

Much anxiety, many hindrances, and many difficulties arose to retard the progress of the building. But Agarithe never lost heart : she seemed to have a conviction that the work was one which God, in His own good time, would both bless and enlarge. At last the chapel was com-

* Such was her love of solitude and retirement that for ten years she never went once down the hill to Algiers, although this town is only at the distance of three kilomètres from Notre Dame d'Afrique.

pleted. But where could they find a fitting statue for the sanctuary?

Now it happened that when Mgr. Dupuch (Mgr. Pavy's predecessor) was passing through France on his way to his new diocese of Algiers, the ladies of Lyons offered him a magnificent statue of our Lady in bronze, on condition that it should be placed in the first church built on African soil in honour of the Blessed Virgin. This statue was placed at first by Mgr. Dupuch above his own palace at Algiers; but the Government interfered, dreading lest this newly-conquered people should take offence at so Christian an emblem. He then gave it to the Trappists at Staouëli, who placed it above the entrance-gate of their monastery, with the inscription :—

POSUERUNT ME CUSTODEM.

It was this statue that Mgr. Pavy went to the Trappists to reclaim, saying: "You have made this Madonna the guardian of your house. Well, now I want her to

change places and become the Queen of Africa." The Trappists replied that they could not refuse her to the Bishop; but also that they had not the heart to take her down themselves from her place as guardian of their monastery. The Bishop smilingly said "he would see to that," and the next day sent workmen and a cart to transport her to the mountain chapel. Agarithé joyfully received her new Queen; and surrounding her with flowers and lights, watched over her with all love and honour until the moment came when she was solemnly installed above the altar on which Mgr. Pavy was about to offer the first Mass of the Pilgrimage.

That day an unexpected honour was paid to the humble Agarithé. At the moment of administering Holy Communion, Mgr. Pavy looked around, and not seeing the Foundress of the Pilgrimage among those who were kneeling at the altar rails, paused and called her by name in a loud voice, amidst the crowd of priests, religious, and pilgrims of every

class who filled the sanctuary. Agarithe was, as usual, kneeling in a little corner at the furthest end of the chapel, and intending to be the last guest at the Eucharistic Feast. But at the voice of the Bishop, she was compelled to come forward; and thus his humble penitent was the first to receive from his hand the Holy Communion at the first Mass of the Pilgrimage of Notre Dame d'Afrique.

It was on the third Sunday in September, the feast of our Lady of Seven Dolours, that this first Mass was celebrated. And the date rested in Agarithe's memory, not only from her tender devotion, from a child, to our Lady's Sorrows, but because she looked upon it as a prophecy. "Notre Dame d'Afrique will henceforth be the consoler of all sad and broken hearts!" she exclaimed, when that evening the Bishop came to rejoice with her over the success of her undertaking. And her words have indeed come true; for not only the Catholics of Algeria, but Christian mothers throughout the world have there

an association of perpetual prayers, which have obtained endless graces, and wiped away countless tears!

But the devil could not bear to witness the success which attended Agarithe's efforts to wrench away from him a kingdom which had so long been his own, and to place it in the hands of her who was to "bruise the serpent's head." On the 10th of March, 1860, as Agarithe was kneeling alone before the Blessed Sacrament and the statue of our Lady, absorbed in prayer, a fearful storm burst over the mountain, uprooting the trees, and carrying off the roof of the chapel, while all its ornaments, sacred vases, and everything it contained, were scattered to the winds. The statue of our Lady alone remained immovable on its pedestal. The violence of the storm may be judged by the fact that the foot of the monstrance was found at the bottom of the mountain, and its rays on the top! The Bishop, much alarmed for the safety of Agarithe, hastened, as soon as the wind would allow him, to the spot. He found

her chapel in ruins; but she herself stretched on the pavement safe and sound at the feet of our Lady. Agarithe was always convinced that this fearful tempest was Satan's last farewell to a spot which for so many years he had made his own; but on which the "Morning Star" had now risen to enlighten and guide the people into all truth.

The zeal of the pilgrims soon repaired the damage done by the storm. Money and gifts for the altar poured in on all sides. And then again Agarithe opened her heart to the Bishop, imploring him to build a larger and more worthy sanctuary on this spot. "See the crowds who cover the mountain top," she would exclaim; "only a few can enter in and kneel for a moment at our Mother's feet. Think how faith would grow, how many graces would be obtained, could we raise a temple large enough to contain all this multitude!"

Mgr. de Pavy agreed; but added, "that he had no means whatever to undertake any fresh work." Agarithe, with the

lively and simple faith of the saints, turned to a little statue of St. Joseph and said : " He was on earth the Procurator of the Holy Family. He laboured and toiled, by the sweat of his brow, for thirty years to provide them with necessities. I can never believe that he will turn a deaf ear to us now, if we ask him to help us to make a fitting home for Jesus and Mary ! " The Bishop, moved by her earnest words, gave her his blessing, and told her to begin praying at once.

Agarithe instantly placed a picture of St. Joseph in her little shop, before which a lamp burnt continually. Among the works she had placed under St. Joseph's patronage was the distribution of a quantity of little pious books and prayers, which she gave gratis to the pilgrims, exhorting them to take them away as a remembrance, and to read them in their own homes to their families. This means she now made use of to spread far and wide her appeals for help to build a larger church. And St. Joseph rewarded her

confidence in him far beyond her expectations. She soon brought a comparatively large sum and laid it at the feet of Mgr. Pavy. "Here are the first stones, Monseigneur!" she exclaimed. "I implore you to begin the work, for I am quite sure St. Joseph will find us the means to finish it."

The Bishop joyfully assented, and resolved to build a temple worthy of its object, to be called, henceforth, Notre Dame d'Afrique. Plans were drawn up; a committee appointed to see them carried into execution; while the Bishop wrote himself to France in all directions for aid in this gigantic enterprise. His appeal was warmly responded to, and the work rapidly proceeded. But the holy old man did not live to see its completion. He died, watching from his window the white cupolas of the beautiful basilica already surmounted by the cross, and recommending to the veneration of his clergy the holy woman who had been the real Foundress of the building.

It was in the month of November, 1866, that God called Mgr. Pavy to his rest. He was succeeded by the Bishop of Nancy, Mgr. Lavigerie, who became the first Archbishop of Algiers. Agarithe's prophecy was about to be fulfilled, and the sanctuary of which she had been constituted the special guardian was soon to be crowded, not only with her countrymen and countrywomen, but with Mussulman children, who would learn to lisp their prayers to "Imana Mariam," as they called her, and finally become true champions of the faith of Christ.

PART THE SECOND.

WE need not dwell on the horrible famine which, during the very first year of Mgr. Lavigerie's episcopacy, spread its black pall over the land. His charity and its results are well known. Suffice it to say that, when every orphanage and his own palace were full to overflowing, he brought the remainder of these poor children to his villa at St. Eugène, under the shadow of "Notre Dame d'Afrique," which became henceforth as "Holy Land" to them. The frequent pilgrimages and processions to this magnificent shrine struck them no less than Agarithe herself, whose greatest delight was to lead them to our Lady's feet. Sometimes they would ask those who superintended them "whether this lady who was always praying was not really the angel sent by heaven to guard the

temple?" In fact, the extraordinary beauty and sweetness of her expression struck all visitors to the church, while her profound recollection awed them too much to let them intrude upon her devotion.

It was about this time that the Holy See delegated to Mgr. Lavigerie, in addition to his diocese of Algeria, that enormous tract of country called the Sahara and Soudan, comprising upwards of fifty million pagans; and the indefatigable prelate at once resolved to found a special missionary congregation for this work, comprising both men and women. On the 2nd of February of the following year the first four missionaries who had come in answer to his appeal met him at Notre Dame d'Afrique, where the Arab dress was given them. The eldest of them likewise received that day sacerdotal consecration from the hands of the Archbishop, and was the first priest of the new congregation. Everything was done privately and in silence at this touching ceremony, and no one was permitted to be

present but Agarithe, who, after the ordination was over, came joyfully and kissed the hands so recently anointed, and then kneeling asked for his blessing, adding—“You are the first priest to wear this dress, but you will not be the last, for God has blessed this grain of mustard-seed, and before long this chapel will be too small to contain the number of those whom our Lord will choose to labour for the salvation of our poor Arabs.”

Her prophecy was verified even in her lifetime, for in less than eight years this congregation numbered one hundred and thirty missionaries devoted exclusively to the evangelization of North Africa.

No sooner was “Notre Dame d’Afrique” completed, than Mgr. Lavigerie invited a religious community (of Premonstratensians) to undertake its services; but they only remained three or four years. Great as was Agarithe’s joy at the care of the church and pilgrimage being intrusted to so fervent a body, this appointment became, in the designs of God, an occasion

of the severest trials she had ever known, and of a kind to which she had hitherto been a complete stranger. When God wills to possess a soul altogether, He does so by immolation. He sends the suffering to which that soul is the most sensitive, and it is through that channel of intense pain that He gives Himself the more abundantly.

We have seen how, from her childhood, Agarithé had passed through the crucible of suffering, and we have come to that period in her life when all ordinary pains and sacrifices were only as ladders leading her higher and higher towards Him Whom she loved. The only real joy she had on earth was to receive Him daily in Holy Communion, and then remain for several hours absorbed in prayer and thanksgiving in the silence of the sanctuary, pouring out to Him all the secrets of her heart and soul. Now it pleased God, for her greater sanctification, to send her, in the person of one of these religious, a director who totally misunderstood his

penitent, treated her as an enthusiast or a visionary, and imposed upon her one of the most painful sacrifices she could have been called upon to make. That was, to leave the church the moment the priest came down from the altar, scarcely giving her time to make an act of thanksgiving after receiving Holy Communion. Thus poor Agarithé, who, like Magdalene, would willingly have passed her life at the feet of her beloved Spouse, was obliged to limit her prayers to the few instants which elapsed between the giving of Communion and the close of the Mass, and was then compelled to hasten back to her shop. Once there she did not know a moment's peace. The pilgrims crowded round it day by day, besides a multitude of people who sought her advice on every possible subject ; so that often she had not a single quarter of an hour to herself till night. This most extraordinary trial lasted five whole years ! She owned once that nothing had ever cost her so much ; but added, with her usual simplicity—" It was, per-

haps, because so few souls have such great need of obedience as my own." But this was not all. This same director, either to prove her, or because God permitted this blindness on his part still further to try the faith of His servant, told her one day that she must leave the place, give up the church and pilgrimage of which she was the foundress, and return to France. He ordered her likewise to join a religious community, saying that he did not approve of the way of life she had hitherto led or the position in which she had been placed.

The blow was an overwhelming one, and became a terrible crisis in a life which was already drawing towards its close. But she persuaded herself that it was her duty to obey, and to accept the trial laid upon her without a murmur. Before leaving Africa, however, she sought the venerable Archbishop, in whom she had the greatest confidence, and who had always been her extraordinary confessor, and told him that she was compelled by obedience to give up

her work at Notre Dame d'Afrique and return to Lyons. It was then that God revealed His will to her, and showed her that, as with Abraham, He was satisfied with her obedience without exacting the sacrifice. Mgr. Lavigerie answered without a moment's hesitation—"Return to your cell. I order you to remain where you are. I will speak to your director; but be very sure you will be the last person that will be allowed to leave Notre Dame d'Afrique!" The veneration of the holy Archbishop had always been very great for this chosen soul. Many times he was heard to exclaim—"I have known a great many people, and lived in many different countries, but I never in my life met with a person whom I think such a saint as Mlle. Agarithe." And whenever he bent his steps to Notre Dame d'Afrique, to implore our Lady's aid in his gigantic undertakings, he would stop at her little shop and order Agarithe to go and pray for his intentions. "Our Lord and His Mother never refuse her

anything," he would add to those around him, as she hastened away to obey his behests.

We hope we have not wearied our readers by referring so often to Notre Dame d'Afrique and its pilgrimage, but it was, as it were, the centre round which every event in Agarithe's life was grouped, from the hour she first landed in Africa. There the first native orphan children were baptized; there the first of the Arab-Christian marriages were solemnized. There again, in 1873, the first African Council was held, after centuries of desolation and darkness. To Agarithe one of the greatest joys in this last event consisted in the fact that all the sacred music used on that occasion and all the ceremonies, were performed by Africans recently converted to the faith of Christ. It was on that day, too, that the statue of our Lady was finally removed from the little chapel where she had so long been venerated to the magnificent throne which had been prepared for her above the high

altar in the great basilica ; while the small chapel which had witnessed so many prayers and graces became, as Agarithe had prophesied, a sanctuary for him whom she always called her "good" St. Joseph, as Patron of the Universal Church.

One thing only now was needed to complete Agarithe's work, and that was the installation of the priests of the African Missionary College on that spot. Often had Agarithe reproached the young missionaries for not bringing their orphan Arab charges more frequently to their holy Mother's feet. "You come here too seldom," she would exclaim ; "this is the natural centre of your mission. This will be your future home."

At that time nothing seemed less likely than their removal to Notre Dame d'Afrique, for the Premonstratensians were building a monastery, with every intention of remaining there. But the troubles of 1871 dispersed the community, and then, as Agarithe had foretold, the Society of African Missioners were finally established

in their place, and native priests and servers now gladdened the eyes of that holy woman, whose one prayer had been to bring the Arab tribes to Mary's feet.

With the completion of this great work Agarithé felt that her life was drawing to a close, and that she was now ready to sing her *Nunc Dimittis*. Her strength daily diminished ; work of all kinds became painful to her ; her features were drawn and livid, and her mortified body seemed literally to waste away. Her weakness soon increased so much that she could no longer work, but passed her time either before the Blessed Sacrament or in her cell, or in what she called "her little corner," that is, behind the door of her shop, where a little window looked in to St. Joseph's chapel.

"If only death would take me in this little den," she would exclaim, "I feel I should then die better at my post!" But sometimes she added, "I think I should like best to die while sweeping out the chapel, and so to appear before our Lord

with my *arms* and while doing a work so honourable to a servant of Jesus and Mary."

To sweep and clean the church and keep it in the most perfect order, was one of the things she loved best. She looked upon it as the greatest privilege and honour, and would not yield it to another, even the very day when she was compelled to take to her bed. It was the last manual work she ever did.

Her reverence for holy places and things was extreme. When she saw the young Arab neophytes kissing the door of the church, she would joyfully exclaim : " Oh, how I understand these poor children, and how I love to see them show such respect to God's house ! " If any one ever gave her a small sum of which she was free to dispose, she would buy incense with it, saying, " I should like to burn perfumes all day long wherever our dear Lord deigns to come and dwell with us. " To a lady who one day complained of acute bodily pain, she said : " Make use of some of the oil

which burns in the lamp before the Blessed Sacrament. You do not know the healing virtues which God gives to that precious oil which honours Him by burning day and night before His Throne."

Next to her love of our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament and of the Blessed Virgin, the devotion which she strove the most to propagate was that to the Holy Family, and especially to St. Joseph. In the very last letter she wrote to an intimate friend, she exclaims: "Dear——, have unlimited confidence in St. Joseph. Every morning I pray for strength and courage for you to the Holy Family, and especially to him. He suffered on earth, and he understands your needs. I have the greatest confidence that this, his Month of March, will not close without your receiving abundant consolations."

This holy woman wrote little in her life, partly from her wish to remain hidden and unknown; partly from her isolation from the world since she arrived in Africa. But a few letters, addressed to an intimate

friend, who became a nun, have been preserved, from which we will give a few extracts.

Writing to her in February, 1843, on the eve of her departure for the cloister, she says: "My poor dear friend,—How much strength and courage you need at this moment! But He for Whom you give up everything will restore to you what you have lost a hundredfold. You know Jesus is never outdone in generosity. Take your heart and soul in both hands, and with the cross and love of Jesus Christ break all those chains of human affection which bury you under their weight. It is better that you should feel the whole length and breadth of the sacrifice you are about to make. Your Divine Spouse will only value your offering the more, for it proves the ardour of your love. Well—a heart on fire for God can do great things.

"Dearest friend,—Let us look on this world as a great prison, and then we shall let our Master change our dungeon as He

wills, until it shall please Him to open to us the gates of our heavenly country. If you become a holy nun, as I hope and pray you will, your convent will be but the antechamber of your celestial mansion. Everything that you are about to leave behind you, abandon freely to the care of your Divine Spouse—He will take care of all—and then go forward yourself, boldly, without ever looking back Let us hope that as we have known and loved each other here below, and only parted at the foot of the Cross, we may meet again borne by this same Cross, on Mount Sion, where there will be no more separations, but joy and delights unspeakable for evermore. Yes, Pauline; let heaven be our rendezvous: it is here that I say to you *à revoir!*”

For more than thirty years this nun and her holy friend had been separated, and had never even corresponded. It was only in 1872 that this Sister, become Superior of her community, remembering the eminent sanctity of her old friend,

wrote to ask the aid of her prayers, and also to beg for her advice in her difficulties. It was certainly not from forgetfulness, or from want of affection, that Agarithe had buried her life in such complete silence, but from a spirit of sacrifice. The following passage in one of her letters to this very friend reveals to us the secret: "I promised our Lord a long time ago never to seek for consolation in creatures. *God alone knows what this sacrifice has cost me!* But as Jesus designed to be jealous of my miserable heart, I did not dare divide its affections Rejoice, my dear old friend," she continues, "that God has sent you such sufferings of heart. When one has gone through this crucible, how far more tender and sympathizing one becomes towards others! . . . Tell me, now, how you are getting on with your troubles. You know that your sufferings and your joys are likewise mine. *Oh, how good it is to have suffered!* How much better one can enter into the sorrows of others, especially into that anguish of

soul which no human words can express !”

Yes—souls : that was the passion of her life ; to save souls ; to find a soul whom she could raise and strengthen to bear the burden of life and bring it nearer to God. Listen to her apostolic words to this same friend a few months before her death : “ Courage, dear friend—courage ! do not allow yourself to be cast down. God proportions His grace to our needs. The more we are sunk in the abyss of our own weakness and miseries, the more He encourages us to love and confidence. Confidence ! Oh, how sweet that word is to my lips ! How I should like to run up and down this sad world, crying out to all who suffer — ‘ Confidence ! ’ Absolute abandonment of ourselves in His hands Who orders all things right. How much I should like to talk to you on that subject of simply giving oneself up, body, soul, and spirit, to His sweet will ! It is so wonderful how God brings good out of evil, even when everything seems lost.

Were I not afraid of sinning against charity, I could relate to you some painful experiences in my own life which yet all turned to good in the end, and now even fill me with joy. Therefore, I should like to bring every soul to feel the most entire confidence in *God alone*, hoping nothing from creatures. Besides, in these days, when, alas! men pray so little, our good God is, I think, more ready to listen to the petitions of those who really love Him, and grants us all we ask, especially spiritual favours."

To this passion for souls Agarithe added an intense sympathy for all forms of suffering. Among the many gifts God had bestowed on His faithful servant, one of the greatest and most remarkable was her power of consoling those who came to her in trouble, and especially when it was a question of their conversion. Her warm heart and her never-failing charity inspired her always to say the right thing, and to suggest that which best suited the circumstances and position of each person with

whom she had to deal. Her memory, too, was extraordinary. She remembered people whom she had not seen for years, with all the details concerning their souls which they had confided to her a long while before, so that they had no need to go over again the history of their troubles. "I know," she would say, "the difficulties you had in such and such a matter. Now tell me how you have been going on." And thus encouraged, they would pour out their whole hearts, and rarely left her without feeling their burdens lightened and their souls drawn nearer to God.

There was one season in the year when she seemed always to be filled with a kind of holy exultation; that was towards autumn, when the retreat of the religious communities and the ecclesiastics began. "How God is being honoured at this moment," she would exclaim; "and what good will result for the future to innumerable souls!"

When she heard of any lost sheep being brought back to the fold, she was quite

beside herself with joy. A short time before her last illness, a person who had lived a very disedifying life, but who had been converted by Agarithe's ceaseless efforts, fell sick and died a holy and admirable death, at peace with God and man. She came with the greatest eagerness to announce the news to her director, her face beaming with joy. "Now that our dear Lord has granted me this favour," she said, "I must never shrink from any future suffering." Sacrifices and mortifications of all sorts had in fact become, with prayer, her daily bread. And whenever she had thus a soul to win she would redouble her fervour and austerities. Yet her ordinary life was, what would be considered even by holy people, most mortified. She slept upon straw and had only the coarsest food, never touching either wine or meat. In the evening her supper was invariably bread and water and an onion, which her faithful friend Anna would prepare for her, or some other vegetable ; and she preferred this to

the most luxurious food. Yet, according to the evidence of this same friend and companion, her outward mortifications were nothing to her interior ones. To one who so constantly watched this pure and fervent life it was evident that her conversation was far more in heaven than on earth. The mere sight of this calm and angelic face, with its extraordinarily sweet expression, in spite of the shade of sadness of which we have already spoken, impressed every one who came to see her. It was like a ray of light from another world.

A soul so closely united to God, so detached from earth, and living so completely among heavenly things, was naturally favoured with special graces and revelations, in spite of the bitternesses with which her path had been strewn. We have often heard the Archbishop say that very frequently she had spoken to him of important matters concerning the Church which she could only have known by supernatural means. So much so, that Mgr. Lavigerie who always had such con-

fidence in her holiness and wisdom, did not hesitate to consult her in all difficult cases, and reaped the benefit of so doing in every instance. One of those who was permitted to know the intimate secrets of this chosen soul, writes: "Our Lord spoke to her very often; but she never would reveal it unless forced to do so by obedience. I had many proofs of this. One day in particular, after Holy Communion, she fell into a sort of trance, and I insisted on knowing the cause, as she had told me she would pray for light concerning a matter which related to myself. Our Lord had desired her to confirm me in an important decision which I was about to take, and of which she knew nothing whatever beforehand."

She had a distinct revelation of her approaching death, and spoke of it to several persons. When in May, 1875, Mgr. Lavigerie, worn out by a long and dangerous illness, was about to leave Algiers for a time and go for a change to Rome, there to find rest at the feet of

the Holy Father, Agarithe drew close to his carriage, which was taking him down to the port of embarkation, and kneeling, exclaimed, "Bless me, Monseigneur! and deign to ask for a special blessing for me from the Holy Father, for we shall never see each other again on earth."

"It is true," replied the Prelate, blessing her with great fervour; "I feel I am at the end of my mortal course."

"No," eagerly answered Agarithe, "you are not the person in question. You will live many years yet to be the blessing of this vast diocese."

The carriage rolled on; but two months after, when the Archbishop heard of the death of this holy woman, he remembered her last words and then understood their full meaning.

From that moment Agarithe's strength hourly diminished; she could no longer stand or even read, and her time was spent entirely in prayer and meditation. At last, on the 25th of June, her director insisted on her going to bed. Then, to the

great surprise of her companion Agarithé asked for a mattress, and when Anna expressed her joy and surprise at her consenting to make use of so unusual a luxury, Agarithé replied : “ It is that, if any one comes and sees me on my poor bed during my illness, they may not perceive anything extraordinary about it.” So strong, even in death, was her determination to conceal all that might make others suspect her austerities !

During her last illness her sufferings were terrible. It was quite heart-breaking to see the way she gasped for breath, to feel her burning hands, and see the perspiration streaming down her face with the agony of the pain. But she only thought of one thing, and that was neither to say nor do anything which should excite the least compassion in those around her.

“ I would not give up my place to another for the whole world ! ” she would say to her confessor. Nor did she ever manifest the smallest weariness during the whole length of her illness. She took

every remedy offered her with the most perfect indifference. One only disgusted her and brought on violent vomiting. Yet she never refused to take it, and only asked the Sister who nursed her to offer it first to Our Lady of Dolours, after which she could swallow it with less repugnance. What most struck the holy missionary who attended her during her last illness, was her unalterable patience in the midst of the most acute sufferings. He used to come and see her regularly twice a day. In the evening she always asked him for his blessing: "It is my best sleeping-draught," she would smilingly say. Almost every morning he brought her Holy Communion, and her soul all through the night was, as it were, consumed with the holy desire to receive Him. "I shall have my Jesus to-morrow," she would exclaim joyfully in the midst of her agony.

On Wednesday, the 16th of July, the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, her sufferings seemed to increase in intensity.

Those around her thought her end was at hand, and that Mary had waited for that day to fetch her faithful servant home. But she guessing their thoughts, said quietly : "No, not to-day ; I must wait a little longer !"

In the night she made an effort to turn, as if to find an easier place in her bed. The Bon Secours Sister who was watching by her said : "I am sure you are not comfortable in that position. Will you not let me turn you round to the other side ?"

"My Saviour was far worse off on the cross," she murmured ; "leave me where I am."

And the Sister remarked that she stayed so to the end, without allowing herself the alleviation of a change of position.

The next morning, being Saturday, she sent early for Father Pascal, to make her last confession, and also to ask his permission to renew her act of profession as a tertiary of St. Francis of Assisi, on this

the last day of her life. One of the greatest happinesses of her existence had been to make this vow of poverty as a daughter of the Seraphic Father. Mgr. Pavy had refused it to her for many years, partly to purify her holiest wishes by contradictions, and partly because he feared to what excesses her spirit of mortification might, in consequence, lead her, and she submitted to the prohibition with her usual angelic sweetness. On the death of that Bishop her desire increased still more; but she had still some time to wait before her director would permit her to enrol herself among the tertiaries. She often said that that day was one of the happiest of her life. And the renewal of her profession as a daughter of St. Francis was the last consolation which she asked for on her bed of death, a few hours before she was to appear before God.

“I never shall forget that pious and touching ceremony,” wrote the Father who was with her. “After kissing respectfully the book of rules, she took in her trem-

bling hands the wax taper which had been given her at the moment of her profession. One saw on her dying face an expression of supreme happiness ; an angelic smile rested on her lips. I was so moved and touched that I had the greatest difficulty in repeating the prayers, although I struggled with all my might to conceal my emotion. I thanked and blessed God, Who had allowed me to see with my own eyes how a saint can die."

"I here affirm," continued her director, "that I ever found her closely united to our Saviour Jesus Christ, always anxious to suffer every cross which it might please our Lord to send her, and to suffer thus until the end of the world, if that were His Divine will and pleasure. The continual remembrance of the death of her Crucified Lord made all sufferings light to her. Whenever she heard the Holy Name pronounced, an ineffable joy seemed to light up her face. Even in the midst of the most acute suffering, her heart, burning with love and filled with consolation,

seemed to taste already of the sweetness of heaven. Taking her little crucifix in her hand, she would kiss with reverent love the Sacred Wounds of our Saviour and exclaim, 'Oh, how enviable is my lot, how happy I am! How many graces hast Thou sent me, my Lord and my God!' and so on, continually making ejaculatory prayers and uttering words of praise and thanksgiving. This privileged soul did indeed hunger after sufferings of which few so well knew the value."

"The thoughts of death," adds her confessor, "which generally send a thrill of fear and agony even through the minds of the best among us, never troubled in the smallest degree this true servant of God. Agarithé saw the approach of the King of Terrors with a joy and a calm which were inexpressible. She had only one wish, and that was to be united to her Spouse and never again to be separated from Him. I have never in my life seen such serenity in any dying person. Ripe for heaven, she had nothing but disgust for

the things of earth. In one word, she lived as a saint and she has died as a saint."

Her union with God increased as death drew near. She spoke no more, and seemed not to notice anything around her. She prayed incessantly, and seemed to be holding continually internal converse with God. Once or twice she raised her voice unconsciously, and they heard her praying for her dear African mission and for the conversion of the Arabs. Again, she would offer all her sufferings for the life of the Archbishop. It was believed that she had made an offering of her own life, so that this beloved and indispensable chief pastor might be preserved to his flock. And, in confirmation of this belief, it came about that the health of that venerable prelate, which for so many months had caused such deep and increasing anxiety to those around him, suddenly and without any apparent reason, began to improve from the hour of Agarithé's death, so that very soon he was able to undertake once more, with renewed strength, the superhuman

works which his zeal and charity had inaugurated in his vast diocese.

It was on Saturday, the 17th of July, that this soul, so full of virtues and merits, took flight for heaven, leaving a body worn out with sufferings and austerities, and murmuring to the last the sweet name of Jesus. The Sister of Bon Secours, who had watched for three weeks by this dying bed, exclaimed, "In my life I have nursed many priests, many holy nuns, many very good people, but never did I see such a death as that of this saint-like Mdlle. Agarithe."

Scarcely had the news of her demise become known, than crowds of mourners hastened up to Notre Dame d'Afrique to pray by her venerated remains until the hour of her interment. It was at Biarritz that the Archbishop first heard the news, and he hastened to send orders to have a grave prepared for her in the centre of that chapel, first of Our Lady and then of St. Joseph, where for so many years she had lived and prayed. Until the vault

was prepared, the coffin was laid in a corner of the chapel. There, day and night, the piety and veneration of the faithful kept up the most brilliant illumination. An incessant stream of people succeeded one another in praying by that bier ; and yet no one seemed able to pray for her soul : an inward feeling appeared to force them to invoke her instead. Popular veneration surrounded, not only the bier, but every corner of her humble home. The greatest anxiety was shown to obtain the smallest thing she had used. Rosaries and crosses were brought to touch the coffin, which was covered with the most beautiful flowers. And it required all the vigilance of the priests to prevent the coffin itself from being cut in pieces, and taken away as relics.

The day of the funeral, which was presided over by the Vicar-General, in the absence of the Archbishop, the crowd was such that not one-half could enter the church. Under the pavement of the little chapel her body now rests, and above it

is a marble slab, bearing this inscription :—

Hic, in spem beatæ resurrectionis requiescit

MARGARETA BERGESIO,

Quæ Immaculatæ Virginis Mariæ in templo suo per annos P.M. XX. servam fidelem se constituens, omnibus Christianis virtutibus, humilitate, caritate, pietate, enituit et bonum Christi odorem usque ad finem præ se ferens obdormivit in Domino die XVII Julii, A.C. MDCCCLXXV.

Annos nata P.M. LXVI.

To this touching inscription the Archbishop added the following words :—

Tanti meriti ne memoria intercidat

R. P. D. Carolus Martialis Allemand Lavigerie,
Primus Algeriensium Archiepiscopus,

Inscripto lapide consignandum jussit.

The pious concourse of the faithful to this tomb has never diminished. The pilgrims of Notre Dame d'Afrique, before descending the mountain, never fail to go and pray for a few moments on the slab which covers the body of this great servant of God. Father Pascal, whose words

we have already quoted, wrote again not long ago : " My conviction is that she will one day be on our altars. Nor am I the least surprised that God is already manifesting her sanctity by miracles." The graces obtained by those who have implored her intercession are very numerous. We will only quote one, a declaration signed and attested by the Superior of the Nuns of the Doctrine Chrétienne, who was one of the first who experienced the power of this holy woman's intercession with God.

I hereby declare that I had for more than a year a stiffness in my right arm, in consequence of an accident, which prevented my being able to use it. Every remedy was tried in vain. But having gone to pray by the remains of Mdme. Agarithé on the day of her funeral, I suddenly was inspired to touch her coffin with my bad arm, and it was cured directly, so that I could bend it backwards and forwards. I cannot but attribute this grace to the protection of a soul so beloved of God and so worthy of veneration.

(Signed) SŒUR MARIE JOSEPH MEYER,
Religieuse de la Doctrine Chrétienne.

Mustapha Supérieure, August 17, 1875.

Perhaps some day we may be allowed to make known other favours obtained on the tomb of the humble but now glorious Agarithe, and to prove that, even in this century, and on that poor land of Africa, so lately given back to the Church of God, the race of saints is not yet extinct. The key-note of her life was her love of God, which enabled her to do the simplest and humblest duties in the most perfect manner. There are no remarkable events in this biography. Agarithe's life was one of trial and suffering, such as we see all around us—of poverty and toil, of no repute among men. Yet was she dear to God and to His Saints, and by her faith, and love, and perseverance in prayer, she effected a work which, more than any other, has given a centre of stability to the mission in North Africa, where her name will ever be associated, as the *Foundress of Notre Dame d'Afrique*, with the labours of those holy Bishops and Priests who, by the grace of God, have once more planted the Cross of Christ on that land,

which for so many centuries had been sunk in Mussulman darkness and error.

NOTE.—Among the graces to be obtained at Notre Dame d'Afrique, there is one which is little known in England, and that is a Mass said in perpetuity every week for the souls of those who have died at sea, of whom a careful list is preserved. It is said at the altar of St. Monica, which has been specially blessed and indulgenced by the Holy Father, who enriched it with the arm of the Saint. Should any mother who has thus lost her boy, or other relative of those who have been drowned, wish to have the names dear to them recorded in this manner, Lady Herbert, of 38, Chesham Place, London, will be happy to receive any such names and offerings, and transmit both to the Father Superior of the Missions there.

THE END.

A

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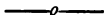
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